



WIPER

(Above) Capt. Carrie Bell, a pilot from Detachment 388, performs an engine run on an F-16 Falcon to make sure it's ready to be placed on alert status. (Right) TSgt. Brian Dick, production superintendent, listens to the radio to ensure everything is running as planned.



Photos by SSgt. Jim Verchio / 60th AMW Public Affairs

Detachment 388 plays vital role in defense of nation

By Capt. Kim Garbett

60th AMW Public Affairs

Before Sept. 11, 2001, most American citizens imagined that if the United States had to be defended, the enemies would come in the form of recognizable hostile nation military forces or aircraft. Then came the attacks. Then came the response by the U.S. Air Force's fleet of refuelers, tankers, fighters, bombers and surveillance aircraft.

Travis, always a busy hub and platform for Global Reach, has become even busier. Operations tempo, deployments and constant alert status became an even more ingrained part of life.

Much attention has been paid to support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, but Travis has also become an important base for the homeland defense mission, Operation Noble Eagle.

With Operation Noble Eagle came fighters on loan to Travis, sitting on constant alert status and performing random combat air patrol missions in support of homeland defense in Northern California and the Western U.S.

Since the attacks, Travis has become a second home to Detachment 388, a small but fast F-16 unit. Det. 388 is assigned here from Hill AFB, Utah, and has their supersonic fighter aircraft ready to go at a moment's notice.

The F-16s, which can reach speeds of up to 1,500 miles per hour,

"But if I take several lives in the air to save thousands on the ground, I know it's the right thing to do."

— Maj. "Slim" Pickens
Detachment Commander, Det. 388

are loaded with deadly weapon systems, including radar-guided missiles, infrared-guided missiles and cannons, to name a few. This single-engine aircraft is a multi-role fighter with both air-to-air and air-to-ground capabilities.

The aircrew and support personnel at Travis are here on a rotational basis but are always ready to go to afterburners should the call come in for an intercept or an escort. They've become accustomed to cup-of-noodles and other packaged food for meals, unless the barbeque is fired up outside their makeshift home on a carefully selected corner of Travis' 6,400 acres.

Maj. "Slim" Pickens, current detachment commander for Det. 388, has had his hands full. As one of the many layers of defense touched by this national crisis and the terrorist attacks, Det. 388 has been busy. At the same time, said Pickens, he and pilots in his



Bell performs a walk around of the Falcon with A1C Gary Roe, crew chief. The walk around is to ensure everything is safe prior to engine start.

command have all undergone soul searching, confronting the never-before-considered thought of possibly shooting down a hijacked American passenger jet.

"To a man, it's an abhorrent thing to do," he said. "But if I take several lives in the air to save thousands on the ground, I know it's the right thing to do."

Pickens explained, however, that the decision to engage and fire is not the pilot's call. "Military and civilian authorities at a much higher level than us let us know whether or not we need to do what might need to be done."

Det. 388 has been called to duty on a number of different occasions, including a recent potential intercept January 31, when the Golden Gate Bridge had some unusual aircraft activity around it. As a cultural land mark, that bridge and the city of San Francisco are potential targets.

Random combat air patrols have been around since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. However, in light of recent world events and attacks on American soil, homeland security in the skies has been beefed up enormously, including strip alerts as well as combat air patrols. Operation Noble Eagle is only one manifestation of the larger effort to guard our nation.

To Pickens, he and his pilots are truly proud to be in a position to protect their homeland should they be called upon.

"When you're guarding your own back yard, you tend to be a little more vigilant," he said. "I believe we all believe in exactly what we are doing."



Roe watches the Falcon's flight controls to make sure they are moving correctly.



To prevent foreign object damage to the aircraft, Roe must inspect his tools and equipment to make sure each piece is accounted for and in its proper place.